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ABSTRACT

The Swedish Basic Skills in a Long Term Perspective research project, which is described in this paper, was prompted by the belief that only a long-term perspective could reveal significant changes in schools and society at large. The general purpose of the described project is to endeavor, in historical and societal terms, to elucidate and appreciate the status and transformation of basic skills instruction in Sweden over a 50-year period (1930-1980). Various sections of the paper discuss the project's (1) theoretical frame of reference, (2) content and form, and (3) educational sociology components. A concluding section discusses the progress of the project to date. (FL)

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NEWSLETTERS 1979, 1980 and 1981.

No.	Title
1979:1	Social segregation in comprehensive schools in Sweden
1979:2	Pedagogics and the school environment
1979:3	Elementary School Studies for Adults
1979:4	The NBE and School of Education Development Study (SLU)
1979:5	School-home-leisure
1979:5	List of Projects 1979/80
1979:7	Internationalization in popular education (INFA)
1980:1	Pupils' thinking and course requirements in science teaching (EKNA)
1980:2	Marks and assessments in school
1980:3	Continuous admissions at AMU centres (SINAMU)
1980:4	Follow-up of school management training (USU)
1980:5	Special pedagogics in pre-school education (SIF)
1980:6	Problem-oriented co-operation between teachers, pupils and parents (POSLEF)
1980:7	List of Projects 1980/81
1980:8	Evaluation of an experimental SYO organization
1980:9	Models for the bilingual instruction of immigrant children
1981:1	Integration of the profoundly deaf and severely hearing impaired in ordinary classes
1981:2	The PANG Project. Process Analysis of Non-Grading.
1981:3	Preconditions of change in schools (FISK)
1981:4	Social segregation in comprehensive schools in Sweden.
1981:5	H.G. Macintosh. Report on a visit to Sweden.
1981:6	Learning problems of junior level children - a Nordic joint research project
1981:7	Needs-oriented language learning for adults (BISVUX)
1981:8	List of projects 1981/82
1981:9	Teaching processes - world conception and Educational Vocational Guidance (SIA-SYO)
1981:10	Swedish science subjects in an international perspective: curriculum, teachers and pupils (SNILLE)

BASIC SKILLS IN A LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE (BAS)

BACKGROUND

This project stems from the debate during the seventies concerning the deficient basic skills of compulsory school pupils. The protagonists in that debate included Egil Johansson, former Professor in the Department of Educational Research, Umeå University, who presented his views in an article entitled "Are we heading for a new illiteracy?" (Forskning om utbildning no. 2/1977). Johansson concludes his article by pointing to the complexity of the problems concerning basic skills, and he calls for research with a broader social and chronological perspective. The project "Basic Skills in a Long-Term Perspective" is an example of the kind of research thus called for.

FOCUS AND STRUCTURE OF THE PROJECT

Purpose

The general purpose of the project is to endeavour, in historical and societal terms, to elucidate and appreciate the status and transformation of basic skills during the past fifty years (1930-1980). In fact the project will look back to the period following the introduction of compulsory elementary schooling in Sweden in 1842 and will trace developments from then to the present day. The consideration of a longer period is justified by the fact that only a long-term perspective can reveal significant changes in schools and society at large.

For present purposes, the definition of basic skills has been confined to reading and writing. Given this general purpose, the project has an explicitly cognitive approach, the aim being

not only to describe but also to try to understand and explain the status and transformation of basic skills during various parts of the period under consideration. This in turn demands an elucidation within the project of the theoretical conditions applying to such an analysis.

A theoretical frame of reference

The theoretical conditions are concerned not least with the dynamics of historical change. As soon as one proceeds to describe changes with the passing of time, the need for a considered approach to history makes itself felt. Our theoretical work is based principally on a materialist view of history. Thus our studies employ a societal or macro perspective which entails certain presuppositions concerning the connection between schools and society and the social function of schools. Our initial premise here is that schools mainly have a dual function, namely the development of social awareness and the training of specific skills for working life. Although the demands of the community at large are taken as determinants of school activities, this does not imply that conditions in schools can be regarded solely as a mechanical reflection of external realities.

The articulation of such basic assumptions serves to develop a conscious theoretical starting point of framework focusing studies on a particular problem field or on certain delineated problems. At the same time, this starting point will constitute an interpretational frame for the analysis of the data collected. The theoretical starting point of framework steers the empirical data in this way, at the same time as the empirical data develop and correct the theoretical framework.

The theoretical framework with which the BAS project begins focuses interest on the content of education. Teaching content and the changes to be made are decided politically. Policy

decisions indicate the framework of school activities. This framework, expressed partly in the form of a curriculum, is to be seen as a compromise between various economic, political and ideological interests.

The BAS project presupposes that different opinions exist concerning the function which schools are to have and concerning the knowledge, skills and values which are to be transmitted to pupils. To elucidate the interests of factors which may have determined changes in teaching content, studies will focus on the analysis of documents of school policy having a bearing on the purpose of the project. These include such sources as party motions, official inquiries and Government Bills, for example.

Content and form

The BAS project ties in with educational history research concerning the emergence and development of literacy (i.e. both reading and writing ability) in Sweden which has been previously conducted at the Department of Educational Research, University of Umeå, under the leadership of Egil Johansson. The research focus of the BAS project can be defined more exactly in the light of experience accruing from that research work.

The previous research has shown that the history of general reading ability dates back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and is rooted in the Reformation and the emergence of the nation state. The Swedish literacy campaign can be said to have "taken off" with the passing of the 1586 Ecclesiastical Act, which called for universal literacy. The aim was to achieve Lutheran doctrinal uniformity and at the same time to produce virtuous, godly citizens. This lay in the interests of both Church and State. Religious doctrine occupied a central position, and set reading passages of uniform content were taken from the Catechism, the hymn book and the Bible. Instruction responsibility was vested in the home and its discharge was supervised by the Church in the annual household examination. This form of

home instruction and ecclesiastical control persisted well after the introduction of universal compulsory elementary schooling in 1842.

The emergence of general writing ability, on the other hand, follows a somewhat different pattern. Proficiency in reading and counting was already an urban necessity by the close of the Middle Ages, town life being a matter of trade and finance. The research findings show that boys living in the towns learned to write at an early age. Universal writing ability, on the other hand, was not achieved until the coming of compulsory elementary schooling. (A more detailed description of the emergence and development of universal literacy - both reading and writing ability - will be found in Johansson, E: The History of Literacy in Sweden in Comparison with Some Other Countries, Educational Reports No. 12, 1977. Department of Educational Research, University of Umeå.)

Within the BAS project we are particularly concerned with certain aspects of this previous research. Thus we are keen to make further progress with questions concerning the content and design of teaching. Our continuing exploration of the history of reading and writing ability will concentrate on elementary/ compulsory school and will be mainly confined to the teaching of mother tongue/Swedish, since the main responsibility for reading and writing instruction is vested in this subject. Principal questions involved by these studies will, for example, include the following. How are the content and design of general reading and writing instruction transformed with the advent of organized schooling? How is instruction transformed with the emergence of industrial society? What changes are observable in connection with the decline of ecclesiastical influence in schools from the turn of the century? What important changes can be observed down to the present day? How do the observed changes interact with changes in the community at large? What interests are manifested?

By relating changes of form and content as manifested in syllabi and teaching instructions for mother tongue/Swedish to changes

7

in the community at large, we will be able to see whether, and if so in what manner, changes in the community at large are expressed in the directions issued concerning educational practice. In order to obtain a more concrete idea of educational practice, it may also be worth while analysing a selection of textbooks. We intend primarily to select a number of readers for beginners, because a comparison of readers from different stages of the period under consideration will provide the clearest indication of a change in the content of reading passages. Moreover, the readers contain instructions concerning the way in which teaching is to be conducted.

Aspects of educational sociology

The previous research into the history of reading and writing was concerned with the emergence and development of reading and writing ability between the seventeenth century and 1930. The findings point to differences between social classes, one such difference relating to reading marks. In the household examinations, marks were awarded on a five-point scale to each individual parishioner taking part. A summary of these marks reveals substantial differences between social classes. For example, the children of civil servants gained top reading marks whether they had attended school or not. The children of crofters or cottars, on the other hand, were far less likely to attain such heights, even if they had attended school. (For further details, see Johansson, E: A quantitative study of elementary education in the parish of Bygdeå, 1845-1873. Department of Educational Research, University of Umeå. Ph. D. thesis, 1972. In Swedish.)

Within the BAS project we are interested in studying aspects concerning the differences of reading and writing ability between social classes. Our initial premise here is that this ability is always rated according to an explicit or implicit norm in the society concerned. The theories developed by Basil

Bernstein concerning various linguistic codes and the viewpoints expressed by Ulf Teleman (Språkrätt, Lund 1979) may be vitally relevant here. As we have already intimated, moreover, it is reasonable in practice to assume that certain groups in society have a better chance than others of securing acceptance for their demands concerning the content and design of education. Given educational content, therefore, may conceivably be more or less suited to pupils from different social categories or classes. Another important difference, of course, concerns the duration of education.

In order to study the respects in which social differences may exist, the BAS project will be made to focus on a meta-evaluation of certain previous studies of reading and writing and evaluations of the teaching of mother tongue/Swedish. This study will be confined to a selection of evaluations from various parts of the period investigated. The following are some of the questions which may arise. What aspects of reading and writing ability are emphasized in studies from different parts of the period? On what problems is attention made to focus during different parts of the period? What types of deficiency are mentioned in evaluations from different parts of the period? What reasons are given for the deficiencies thus mentioned? Which pupil groups are the carriers of the deficiencies referred to? Is there any tendency or risk of growing differences of reading and writing ability between different social categories?

On the strength of what has now been said concerning the focus of the BAS project, its structure can be summarized as that of a study on three levels, each of which is being followed up throughout a period extending from the introduction of compulsory elementary schooling (1842) to the present-day compulsory school (1980).

- The social level of decisions of school policy as manifested in party motions, official reports and inquiries, Government Bills etc.

- The educational level of the design and content of teaching as manifested in curricula and selected teaching materials.
- The individual level of the educational outcome as revealed by various evaluations, e.g. reports by elementary school inspectors, previous research findings and certain official figures.

Thus the empirical material will mostly be taken from existing archives and sources. Using this source material, we shall attempt to plot and interrelate the changes occurring at each of our three levels. As work proceeds, certain changes and sources may prompt a closer study of a particular part of the period under consideration, other parts being treated more superficially.

With the research approach indicated here, we find that it is possible to elucidate new aspects of the problems concerning basic skills. This in turn will make it possible to acquire knowledge which can confer a better understanding of the present situation and current educational debate, while at the same time helping to improve our knowledge concerning the impact on educational practice of conditions and changes in the community at large.

SOME WORK TO DATE

In view of the character of the BAS project, no specific results will be presented while research is in progress. A continuous account will be given in the final report to be presented after the end of the 1982/83 fiscal year, which is the terminal year of the project. We shall now turn to consider some of the experience accruing from the work which has been done so far.

The project began with a review of previous research work in the Department of Educational Research, Umeå University, con-

cerning the history of reading and writing ability. This revealed various aspects worth following up in the present project. As has already been made clear, these aspects relate to the form and content of teaching and to differences between social categories.

Work then continued in the form of extensive theoretical studies aimed at developing a theoretical starting point or framework for subsequent work under the project. The content of this framework has been roughly indicated in the preceding account. (For a more detailed description, see Allergren, H & Andersson, I, 1980 a.) Since then, studies have been made to focus on historical facts concerned above all with major economic, political, ideological and educational changes in Sweden during the period selected for investigation. This will eventually serve to augment our theoretical model, providing us with a more adequate background against which to analyse the empirical material. This material can at the same time lead to a correction of the previous starting points and may prompt new and more relevant point of inquiry. Thus the alternation of theoretical studies and studies of historical fact with empirical work is a characteristic feature of this project, and in this way a fruitful interchange is being obtained between theory and empiricism.

Empirical work was made to focus first on a general survey of the available sources. Relevant source material could eventually be delineated (see page 7), and work has now begun on summarizing and processing the material compiled.

One assignment is concerned with the concept of basic skills and is aimed at investigating the meaning officially imparted to it. The source material here comes from party motions, official reports, legislative proposals, curricula and certain official manuals and instructions. Opportunities have thus arisen of testing the usefulness of sources of this kind. In

the material we can trace the emergence of the concept of basic skills as an educational concept in the early seventies and its disappearance at the end of the decade. To begin with the concept has an exceedingly narrow significance geared to a basic mathematics course for low achievers (Basic skills in mathematics, Swedish NBE, 1973). Gradually the concept is broadened to include general living competence. The concept of basic skills (basfärdigheter) disappears with the introduction of the new Compulsory School Curriculum (Lgr -80), in which it is superseded by "fundamental skills" (grundläggande färdigheter).

In the material which has been compiled, we can also see how educational planning based on the approach of educational technology gives way to aspects of developmental psychology and an emphasis on cognitive theories of learning. The requirement of a definition of goals and content is subordinated to the principle of individualization.

Experience gained from this work on the concept of basic skills brings new questions into focus. One of these concerns the principle of individualization. In the subsequent course of our work, it may be interesting to investigate when this principle is broached and how it is implemented at various stages of the period under investigation.

In another study we have charted Swedish educational research into reading and writing. This survey covers the period between 1905 and 1980. The first professorial chair in education was founded in 1910, in Uppsala. Its first incumbent, Bertil Hammer, concentrated on initial reading instruction, and among other things he published a reading primer for the first two grades of elementary school and devised a method of his own, known as an interest method. Our survey enables us to trace the concentration of educational research on different problems at different times. Thus standardized achievement tests were already being developed in the twenties. One of the first of the Swedish tests was a spelling test. Educational research broadens from

the 1940s onwards and focuses to a great extent on didactic questions. Reading and writing disabilities are a dominant problem in the forties and fifties. Interest during the sixties focused on disabled pupils, for whom a number of teaching programmes were developed. The construction and testing of teaching programmes and self-instructional materials also occupied the forefront in other contexts. The 1970s brought a distinct change. The main emphasis now was on language and linguistic development, reading and writing instruction on the basis of speech, and learning to read as a process of developmental psychology.

Partly on the basis of the research material which has been charted, we will select suitable surveys for closer analysis with a view to shedding light on the points of inquiry we have already indicated concerning social differences.

PAPERS

Allergren, H & Andersson, I (1980 a). A theoretical starting point for a study of educational change. Graduate thesis, Department of Sociology, Umeå University. (In Swedish)

Allergren, H & Andersson, I (1980 b). Basic skills in a long-term perspective - Presentation of a project. Information from the BAS project. Department of Educational Research, Umeå University. (In Swedish)

Andersson, I & Wennberg, M (1981). Reading and writing as educational problem areas. A survey of educational works and educational research in Sweden, 1905-1980. (Stencil. In Swedish)

Andersson, I (1982). Basic skills - or the history of an educational concept. (Stencil. In Swedish)

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